

# The Coming of the Piano

BY ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE

THE early November twilight was gathering on the prairie. The last quail-call had sounded, the last mottled breast had pressed itself to earth in the stubble. A lamp glowed palely in the level distance from the window of a cabin. The straight, flat road was beginning to lose itself in shadow ahead.

Along this road, which a boy would have scanned in vain for a pebble to shy at a bird, a pair of plump, sedate horses nodded regularly as they bent to their work. Their load consisted of a long, tall box, which nearly filled the wagon-bed. On this box sat a small boy—if his ceaseless squirming and twisting could be called sitting—and on the spring-seat in front two men.

"It's gettin' late, Web," said the older man finally, clucking at the team. "I'm afraid Kate will come home before we get this thing stowed away in the parlor, and spoil it all."

"I think not," answered his son, reassuringly. "She had examination papers to mark to-day."

"I'll bet she will!" piped out the boy from behind, in shrill, excited tones. "'Tain't so easy to fool Kate as you think."

"We'll fool her this time," said the father, with a chuckle of anticipation.

As they neared a grove of noble maples clustering around a large, inviting frame house, two girls in short dresses came flying, bareheaded, down the road. Brant stopped the team and hoisted one of them up to his lap, while Web did the same for the other.

"Is that *it*, papa?" asked the younger one, under her breath, as she gazed big-eyed at the imposing box.

"Looks like it, sis, don't it?" he answered, gayly.

"Yes, and I've set on it ever since we left town, and 'ain't got a splinter in me yet," boasted Billy. "You can't, though, Milly, 'cause you're a girl and 'd fall off!"

"I don't want to," answered Milly, contentedly snuggling against her father's side.

"Your sister 'ain't come yet, has she?" asked Mr. Brant.

"No, but she let out school ten minutes early, and said she'd be home by five, and it's 'most that now," answered the child.

"She's goin' to ketch us, Web," groaned Brant.

"I don't think she'll be home before half past five, papa," interposed the older girl.

"Why don't you think so?" he asked, at her significant tone.

"Because I set the school clock back half an hour at noon," said she, simply.

Mrs. Brant and Lon, another grown son, met the load in the yard. Her eyes were misty, although her face was beaming.

"Henry, I thought you and Web would never come!" she exclaimed. "The children have been half wild, and Milly was sure that she saw Kate coming every minute. I have a lamp and hammer and screw-driver here on the porch all ready for you. Do you want anything else?"

"Nothing but time," answered Brant, as he carefully swung the powerful team around and backed the wagon up to the porch.

Half a minute later the three husky men were tugging and straining at the nine-hundred-pound box. Mrs. Brant stood by, smiling, with the tools in her hand, so that not a second might be lost; the girls looked on with sparkling eyes.

Billy was stationed at the horses' heads, merely to get him out of the way, for Prince and Joe were absolutely trustworthy, and knew just what was required of them in the way of standing still. But when the heavy instrument was half on the porch, half in the wagon, Billy, burning with his responsibility,

suddenly raised on his toes, gave Prince's bridle a smart jerk, and bawled, "Whoa!" The startled animals took a step forward; the piano, sticking to the wagon, slipped to the edge of the porch, and there the precious thing hung, with an inch of flooring between it and destruction.

Mrs. Brant gasped and turned faint, but the next instant Lon was at the horses' heads, backing them in place again. Then Brant, white with anger and fright, took a fierce stride toward the cowering, conscience-stricken lad.

His wife's hand stayed him. "No, Henry," said she, gently. "It's her birthday gift. Let's not have it marred by a single harsh word. Billy didn't mean to do it."

At last the box was safely landed, and then the great dark red, glossy, beautiful object was slowly slipped out.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Mrs. Brant murmured softly, "I wish grandma could have lived to see it."

"I suppose she can see it, mother, from where she is," said Web, with an understanding smile.

"Well, mother, get your blanket," said Brant, with an anxious glance toward the road. "She's liable to come any minute, now."

The blanket was brought and held against the jamb of the front door, according to the piano-man's instructions, in case of accidental contact; the piano was rolled carefully through, first into the hall, then into the parlor, and finally into the corner which had been selected for it fully six weeks before, in secret family council, while Kate was at school.

This room was heated only on special occasions. This was one of them, and the wood-stove was crackling and roaring in quite a hilarious way, as though it knew a thing or two itself about birthday surprises. Lon went back to the wagon after the stool; Mrs. Brant deftly placed a vase and a photograph or two upon the top of the piano, laid some music on the rack in front, and, lo! the newcomer was at home.

"Mother, set down and play one of your old tunes on it, just to try it, before she comes," said Brant, unexpectedly.

Mrs. Brant blushed quite girlishly, and looked at Web for his opinion.

"Not now," said that thoughtful son. "You could hear it a quarter of a mile down the road. And we'd better be getting the lamp out of this room, and the box away. If she sees a light in the parlor, she'll suspect something, sure."

The children, in a panic of delight at all this secrecy and manœuvring, scuttled away; the stove was shut off to stop its roaring, which Kate would certainly have heard; the light was carried out, and the double doors closed, in their normal position. The empty piano-box was slid quickly into the wagon again, the loose boards were tumbled in after it, and the whole, with crack of whip, went rumbling toward the barn.

But there was an atmosphere of expectancy and excitement about the house which could not be so easily disposed of. Nor were the children alone responsible for it. Mrs. Brant, with a bright red spot on each cheek, started to wind the clock, when she had opened it only to get the key to her chest of silver-ware. Henry, the phlegmatic Henry, whose religion was placidity, pulled off his boots and then put them on again, in place of his slippers, causing Milly to shriek with delight.

In addition, the supper table was spread with one of Mrs. Brant's choicest white flowered cloths, and set with silver and glass that seldom saw the outside of the china-closet. In the kitchen two great juicy steaks lay on the table, in close proximity to the smoking-hot stove, awaiting the proper moment, which would be when Lilian came racing in from the gate to announce that Kate was in sight.

"Billy, stop snapping your eyes that way," said Mrs. Brant, with a laugh. "A blind man could see that something was up. Go wet your hair and I'll brush it. I want to slick you up a *little* bit."

"What do you want to slick him up for?" asked Brant, gravely, and he noticed for the first time that his wife had on her silk waist. "She'll know something's up, sure, if Billy's hair is combed."

"Sure enough!" she cried, in amusement. "But as soon as she sees the ta-

ble she'll know it, anyway. And I think it would be a nice idea for you and the boys to slip into your good coats. You know how she appreciates anything of that kind."

She paused, smiling wistfully. Brant looked dubious. He could buy his daughter a piano for her birthday, but to put on his best coat—that was another thing, not to be lightly done. Nothing less than church or a funeral could ordinarily lure forth the black, ill-fitting garment.

"I suppose mebbe I could," he admitted finally, rising slowly. "I don't know when I'll get a new one, though—now."

"It is *I* who will do without the new things, Henry," said his wife, happily, resting a hand upon his stooped shoulder. "I claim that as my privilege—it is my contribution to the piano."

As Brant disappeared in the bed-room just off the sitting-room, she charged Billy to run to the barn and tell the boys, who were feeding and bedding the stock, to go secretly to their room when they were done and put on their best coats, and not come down until the supper-bell rang. But first she buttoned him into his little double-breasted jacket, hitherto reserved for Sundays, cautioned him not to get it dirty, and kissed his shining face.

It was nearly six o'clock when the door quietly opened and there stepped into the deserted sitting-room a slight young woman with a girlish but proudly lifted breast, well-braced shoulders, midnight hair, and a peculiarly agile carriage. A single glance into her sober, purple eyes made it plain how the big rowdy boys in her school had been quelled, after having put more than one man teacher to flight. She looked tired now, though, and somewhat pale; and after laying down her little lunch-basket and a thick heap of examination papers, she removed her hat and pressed her delicate fingers to her temples. There was something vaguely suggestive of discontent in the movement. Then she went up to her room to wash and comb her hair for supper.

It was a little thing, this withdrawing to wash her hands, but to the family,

who washed in a common basin in the kitchen and dried themselves on a common roller-towel, there was something unlike and devotional about it. And it contributed, with a score of other refined habits, to make her room little less than sacred to the men of the house, and to crown her with a halo of inviolability. In fact, if Henry Brant could have expressed himself in his higher moods, he would have said that an angel had been given to his keeping.

"Have we beefsteak for supper?" asked Kate in surprise of Lilian, upon her return, detecting the savory odor which penetrated to the sitting-room.

"Yes," answered Lilian, biting her lip to hide a smile.

"Did father go to town this afternoon?"

"Yes, and took Billy. That's why he went home at noon."

"Billy mustn't go home at noon any more without my permission."

At sight of the brilliant dining-table, Kate came to an abrupt halt on her way to the kitchen to help her mother give the finishing-touches to supper. At the same moment Mrs. Brant opened the kitchen door.

"Have we company, mother?" asked the daughter, hastily.

"Yes. Didn't Lilian tell you?"

"Why, no." She shot a questioning glance at Lilian, and then looked down at her clothes. "I can't appear in this old skirt. Who is it?"

Her mother's eyes twinkled. "Some one that you won't have to dress up for. A young lady who has just reached her majority."

"Ah, mother!" exclaimed the girl, at once relieved and pleased, and kissed her. "I didn't know whether any of you would think of it or not, and I'm so glad. Is that what the beefsteak is for, too?" she added, laughing.

"Yes," said Mrs. Brant, reaching for the bell.

The men filed in in their impromptu splendor. Lon grinned rather foolishly as he caught Kate's roguish eye. To be sure, their black coats did look a little ridiculous above their rusty trousers and coarse, mud-stained shoes. But when the latter were tucked under the table the hastiness of their make-up was betrayed

only by the collars of their gray flannel shirts.

Kate looked up and down the table, after grace, with bright eyes and flushed cheeks. How easy it was to make her happy! None of them needed to feel her pulse to know that her heart was fluttering.

"You don't expect a speech, I hope," said she, and though she smiled bravely, there was an undeniable shyness in her eyes as they flitted from one to the other.

"No more than your face has already made," said Web, with his quiet smile. He, perhaps, understood her best of all.

"I want to tell you all, though," she added, "how happy you have made me. This is almost compensation for the very ancient feeling I have had all day. I wouldn't object to getting old if I could also be getting on. Now if I could get a school in town next fall, and take music lessons, and beg, steal, or rent a piano to practise on, I should be willing to be thirty-one instead of twenty-one. But there! I made a solemn vow this morning, all to myself, that I wouldn't complain any more. What's the matter with you, Billy?"

At her mention of piano Billy's eyes began to show alarming symptoms of popping from his head; and though he was now doing his best to look unconscious, his efforts were far from convincing.

"Billy can't keep a secret," said Mr. Brant, complacently, "so I guess you'd better jump up, Lilian, and get those presents."

Lilian, primed for her part, sprang up and instantly returned from the sitting-room with an armful of small packages, which she laid around the astonished Kate's plate. A new lunch-basket from Mrs. Brant; a box of colored pencils for marking examination papers from Billy, who hinted that if she didn't need the red one, he could use it to advantage in drawing Indians; a handkerchief from Lilian—something from each except her father, who sat at the head of the table looking not the least guilty over his neglect. The shrewd Kate saw through him, though.

"From all except you, father!" she said, reproachfully, to give him a chance.

"Well, I *have* got a little something for you, to tell the truth. But you'll have to wait till after supper. I can't let a meal like this get cold for any birthday gifts."

Something in his tone caught her attention. Billy's eyes, moreover, were not yet normal, in spite of the family gifts having been brought forth. But if a great hope leaped up in her bosom, it sank again when her mother said, still preserving the great secret:

"Henry, you might just as well go and get it now. These children won't eat a mouthful until you do."

He couldn't *go and get* that for which Kate longed. How could she suspect any artifice in those words, coming from her mother?

"Are you sure it's the children, mother, that can't eat?" asked Brant. "I don't see as you have done much damage to that piece of steak on your own plate. Go ahead now and let my present wait."

Supper over, they filed into the sitting-room, Billy and the younger girls crowding their father's heels in a manner that again sent Kate's hopes up. Mrs. Brant took time to step hastily into the kitchen and glance at her dish-water.

"Sit down now, all of you, and I'll bring Kate *my* present," said Brant, still carefully adhering to the programme of deception and surprise. He stepped into the dark parlor and half closed the door behind him so that Kate could not see in. Billy quivered.

"I can't find it, mother," called Brant, after a moment. "Somebody must have moved it. Bring a lamp."

Kate sprang up with a little nervous laugh and seized a lamp, but her mother took it from her almost as quickly. She feared the girl would drop it when the crisis came.

"You go ahead," said she to Kate, with a strange huskiness. Her own heart was pounding almost painfully, and she was wishing it all over with.

Billy, passing the safety-point of pressure, let out a whoop, turned a hand-spring right there in the room, against all law, upset a chair, and sent the cat scuttling under the stove. Then he darted into the parlor, closely followed by the hardly less excited Milly and Lilian.

Kate paused at the threshold, halted by the unexpected warmth from the parlor. In the dark corner opposite she saw something glistening—something tall and looming, with a narrow line of white across its front. She advanced unsteadily, with a face as white as marble. Reaching her father, she blindly seized the hard, knotted hands which had done the work and made the beautiful thing possible, and then sank, a limp burden, into his arms.

"I guess we overdone it, mother," said he, hastily. "Run and get the camphor, Web."

"No, no, I don't want it!" protested Kate, encircling his neck. "I—I just want to cry."

And cry she did, with her head on his bosom, while he awkwardly stroked her dark hair, and her mother nursed her in glistening, yearning eyes.

"Wot's she cryin' for?" whispered Billy, scornfully. "I'll bet paw wouldn't 'a' bought it if he'd a-knowned that."

Then Kate slipped from her father's arms, suddenly knelt before the startled Billy, swept him to her breast, and rained his little face with kisses. "Oh, Billy, Billy, what *would* we do without you!" she cried, and laughed wildly, and smothered him again with her soft warm lips, and laughed again, until the ungrateful lad had wriggled free and wiped from his mouth that precious moisture for which men have thirsted unto death.

She then arose and faced them all, with hands tightly clasped. She knew now where the hogs and steers had gone which had been taken to town. She knew why Lon had decided to wear his old overcoat another winter; why her mother had insisted that the kitchen could go a little longer without a new floor; why Web—proud, fastidious Web—had declared with a laugh that his old buggy was still good enough to go courting in.

"I—can't—say anything," she faltered, with quivering nostrils.

"Not with your tongue, but with your fingers," said Web, and gently pushed her down upon the stool.

It may not have been a masterly performance which followed, yet who shall say it was not? It wove a magic spell

around the little group of listeners. Web's fancy flew five miles across the prairie, where a sweet girl was at that moment, in all likelihood, combing her sunny hair against his coming, and laying all the little snares of love—just as if he were not already hopelessly enmeshed. The father's clod-stained feet left the earth for a brief spell, in a vision of the sacredness of fatherhood such as had seldom been vouchsafed him before. And the mother—she sat hushed and starry-eyed, forgetful of the travail which had sapped her young womanhood and the toil which had bent and hardened her hands.

That night Henry Brant, in a wakeful moment, heard the creaking of a loose board in the parlor floor. Slipping noiselessly from his wife's side and seizing a heavy stick which stood in the corner, he tiptoed into the sitting-room. There he paused. Through the double doors, by the light of the moon, he saw a little white-robed figure in the middle of the room, motionless, uncertain, bewildered. Her face, her extended hands, the one bare foot thrust forward in the moonlight, were as white as the clinging fabric which enshrouded her.

After a moment she glided to the piano, pressed her soft warm body to its cold hard case, stretched her arms lovingly along it as far as she could, and then pillowed her head contentedly upon its top. Her long plait of hair swept the key-board.

Brant took it that she was asleep, and, his own child though she was, the ingrained superstition of the race made his heart beat quicker. He dared not waken her, yet he dreaded the moment, in that solemn silence, when she would sit down and, guided by the invisible fingers of the spirit of the night, strike from those steel cords, perhaps, some weird unearthly music which had never yet been set to note.

But she did not play. After a little she slipped away as noiselessly as she had come. At the foot of the stairs she paused an instant, asleep though she was, daintily gathered her gown in her hand, uncovering her snowy feet and ankles, and then passed upward, ghostlike, out of her father's sight.